

Alaska

Fishing the Discovery Channel

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JONATHAN BOULTON AND STEVE CARTER

If you had to choose a fishing “bucket list”, would Alaska be one of your choices? Contributor **Jonathan Boulton** made the pilgrimage and came back a believer.





Main photo left: Sockeye salmon migration – an amazing sight.

Previous page insert: Fishing companions.

In Alaska, bears are a fairly common sight.

Previous page bottom: The author with a trophy king salmon.

The term “bucket list” seems to crop up a lot these days. The movie with the same title, starring Jack Nicholson and Morgan Freeman, featured the duo’s comical embarkation on a trip to tick off their list of ten things to do before they died. If fly fishermen were to compile lists of where they want to fish before they move on to the great lake in the sky, Alaska would undoubtedly feature on most of them. Its vastness is breathtaking, its remoteness exhausting, and the unrivalled diversity of its fishing enthralling.

THE AGE-OLD CYCLE OF LIFE AND DEATH

Every summer in Alaska, five different species of migratory Pacific salmon make their way from the ocean upstream into a vast network of rivers and lakes. This lifecycle forms the basis of an entire food chain: the salmon spawn in vast numbers, and in turn hungry rainbows, dolly varden and Arctic char gobble up their nutrient-rich eggs. Once they have spawned, the Pacific salmon do not return to sea (unlike Atlantic salmon) – they weaken and eventually die, providing a feast for the grizzly bears and an array of birds.

The surviving fry grow into smolt, which begin their long journey back to the sea. As they migrate downstream, they are herded into baitballs and harassed by rainbows, lake trout and char. The resultant frenzy is similar to what you’d expect to see in a salt water environment where dense concentrations of baitfish are being dipped into by noisy, wheeling terns while being smashed from below by ravenous predators. The best way to encapsulate the experience is to liken it to “fishing the Discovery Channel”.

WHEN TO GO AND WHERE TO START

The intimidating aspect of embarking on a trip to Alaska is deciding where to fish in a state one third the size of the entire USA, with thousands of river systems, mountain lakes and countless streams. There are literally hundreds of

fishing lodges and operators to choose from, offering everything from drifting rivers in inflatables and eating canned food under canvas, to five-star accommodation and food and daily fly-outs. Also, the timing of a trip is crucial, with the salmon species arriving in the river systems in spring: first the kings, chum and sockeye, then the silvers by mid-August and, post-spawn, the massive rainbows vacuuming up eggs and rotting salmon flesh.

In June this year, Derek Manson and I led two groups of anglers to Alaska. We used the Royal Coachman lodge, part of the Sweetwater Portfolio owned by the three Vermillion brothers from Montana. Pat, Jeff and Dan Vermillion have an impeccable reputation in the international fly fishing travel industry, their accomplishments including establishing the longest-standing conservation-based taimen fishery in Mongolia, as well as being the first Westerners to venture into post-communist Russia in the early 1990s to set up fly fishing lodges, including the world famous Ryabaga on the Ponoï River (where Derek and I guided for some time).

Most Alaskan lodges are situated in small towns or native villages; however, the Royal Coachman is a true, remote wilderness lodge situated on the banks of the Nuyakuk River in the heart of the 1.6 million acre Wood-Tikchik State Park. Just to the west is the 4.8 million acre Togiak National Wildlife Refuge, accessible only by floatplane. Each evening, over a dinner not out of place in a Michelin-starred restaurant, a rotation of two anglers per guide and two groups per aircraft is discussed and finalised. The lodge owns two de Havilland Beaver floatplanes, the most remarkable aircraft imaginable. Designed in the 1920s and built through the 1950s, climaxing in an excess of production for the Korean War, these workhorses lift off with a heavy load and land silky smooth on any lake or semi-straight stretch of river. From here, one either walks along the banks or gets into jet boats that the lodge has cached at a variety of gravel bars and lake shores.

DIVERSITY OF SPECIES

The variety of fishing that can be accessed is mind-blowing; from clear mountain lakes for trout, char and dolly varden to numerous rivers for salmon species. Late June and early July are arguably the best months for a cross-section of what Alaska has to offer. For the rainbows, use 5- or 6-wt rods with floating lines and sink tips, and baitfish and Clouser imitations for those feeding on smolt. I had some of the most enjoyable technical fishing catching rainbows on long leaders and small flies; they were eating tiny emergers in the tail-out of a huge lake, where its inflow produced a short section of river before flowing into another mountain lake. Another method I found exhilarating was fishing downstream, swinging a deer hair and rubber mouse tantalisingly across the river with resultant heart-stopping takes.



For the lake trout, we used 8- and 9-wt rods, sink tip lines and baitfish patterns fished under the salmon and over drop-offs where streams enter mountain lakes. This produced magnificently marked fish with white fin tips.



Northern pike occur in most of the river and lake systems, preferring still backwaters and grassy bays, where they hide in ambush among the weeds. Fishing for pike is highly visual, spotting fish and then casting ahead of them with Dahlberg Divers or deer hair mice on 8- or 9-wt rods with floating lines.

This page, top: Dolly varden. Above: Northern pike is a great fly rod species. Top right: A pretty 28-inch lake trout.

Right middle: A rainbow on a rubber mouse pattern.

Right: Sockeye salmon.

Next page: The remoteness that makes Alaska so special.

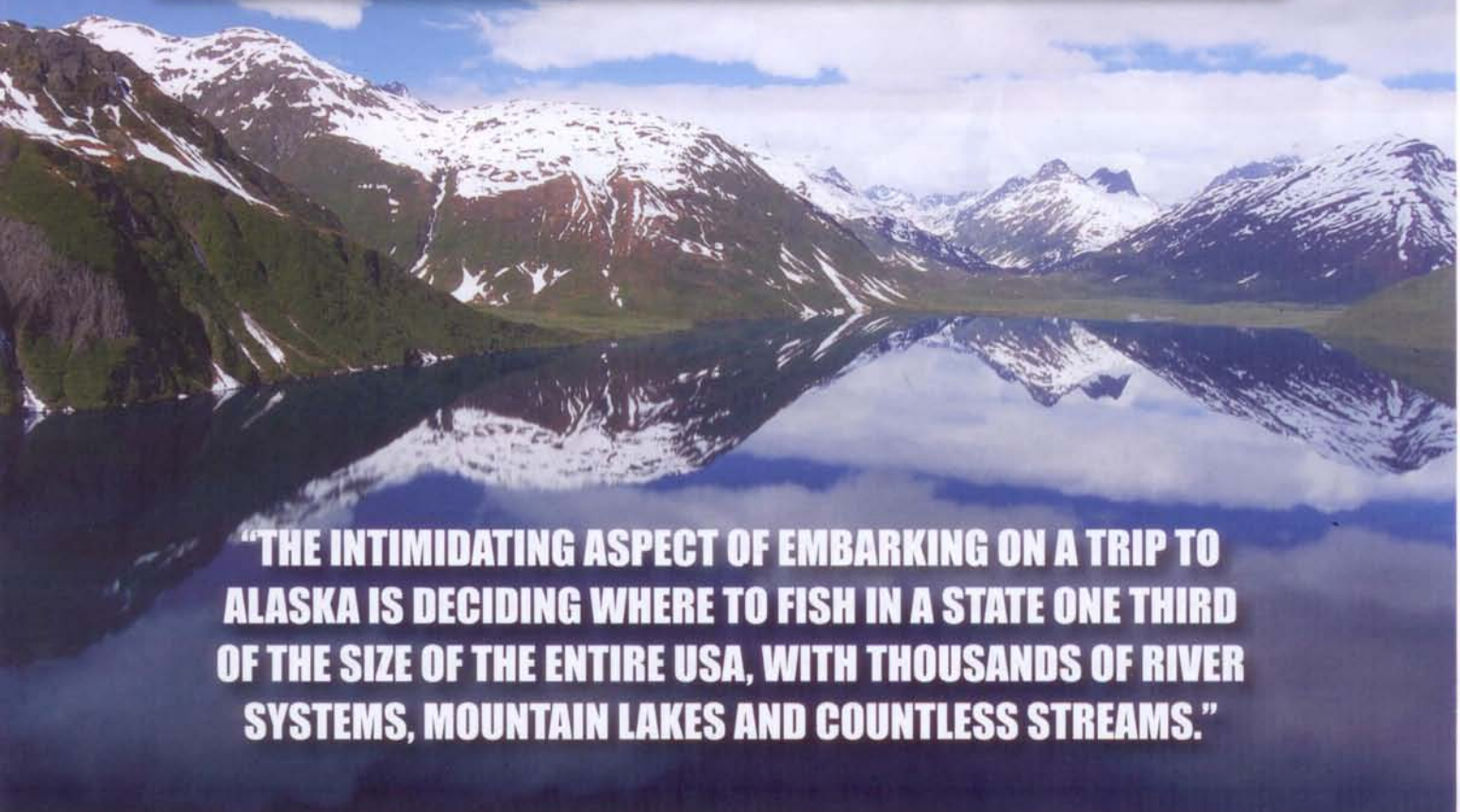




The same outfit can be used for the smaller salmon, the chum and sockeye. As far as fly selection is concerned, as they say in Alaska: "You can use any fly, as long as it's pink!" Although this was the case to a certain degree, the sockeyes that collect in vast numbers at river mouths are predominantly plankton eaters out at sea, and hence very difficult to hook legitimately. However, I found that when using a minnow or baitfish pattern

they would react very aggressively, snapping at the fly in a determined fashion, resulting in a perfect hookup.

Chum salmon, also known as dog salmon (being plentiful, they were used to feed the sled dogs), enter the river with a clean silver sheen in early spring and colour up with the most unusual multi-coloured vertical barring. Their huge numbers



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definitely make one complacent, but we unanimously agreed that they fought relentlessly. Being avid Spey casters, Derek and I were determined to catch salmon on double-handed rods, knowing their effectiveness for covering big water. Casting down and across, swinging the flies took many chum salmon.

looking depressions on the inside bends where the salmon prefer to run up. Here, the boat would be anchored and then, using sink tip lines and heavily weighted flies with split-shot above them, the purple, pink and fuchsia flies were pitched upstream and dead-drifted over holding fish or their lies, not unlike

We experienced hot, clear weather – not textbook conditions for salmonoids. The guides concurred that it was a sinister reminder of global warming which, by their own admission, resulted in fewer fish in the river. However, I found the diversity, quality and quantity of fishing beyond anything I had expected. I can

“I CAN STATE EMPHATICALLY THAT ALASKA IS NOT OVERRATED.”



Top: Any fly will work, as long as it's pink! Above: The prize – king salmon. Left: Derek Manson with a chum salmon.

However, the primary target was the king salmon, and we soon learnt that they were not as easily taken on the swinging fly. It was interesting to be taught another method of catching salmonoids by the excellent local guides. Using their oars, they would quietly drop downstream, spotting pods of fish or hunting for likely

Czech nymphing. Not exactly elegant stuff, but by persistently attempting a good dead-drift, the holding king salmon eventually snap at the irritating fly, engulfing it as it comes past. I was very fortunate to hook a king salmon of over 40lb this way – the fish of a lifetime caught on the trip of a lifetime!

state emphatically that Alaska is not overrated. Bear in mind that this destination is a long way to travel to not get it right as far as timing, location and the operator are concerned – so do your homework to avoid disappointment. Alaska deserves to be on your bucket list – and you deserve to tick it off!